

# Wesleyan identity in black Methodist perspective: a historical and constructive theological conversation

Identidade Wesleyana na perspectiva de Metodistas africanos estadunidenses: uma conversa teológico-histórico-construtiva

Identidad Wesleyana en perspectiva de metodistas africanos de los estadounidenses: una conversación teológico- histórica y constructiva

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, describes its contribution to and involvement in the civil right movement in the US in the fiftieth and sixtieth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and introduces to the respective bibliography and discussion among social scientists and historians.

**Keywords:** American Methodism; African Methodist Episcopal Church; African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Colored Methodist Episcopal Church; Civil right movement.

## RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta a história da Igreja Metodista Episcopal Africana, da Igreja Metodista Episcopal Africana Sião e da Igreja Metodista Episcopal de Pessoas de Cor, descreve a sua contribuição para e seu envolvimento no movimento de direitos civis nos EUA nas décadas cinquenta e sessenta do século 20, e introduz à respectiva bibliografia e discussão entre cientistas sociais e historiadores.

**Palavras-chave:** Metodismo americano; Igreja Metodista Episcopal Africana; Igreja Metodista Episcopal Africana Sião; Igreja Metodista Episcopal de Pessoas de Cor; Movimento dos direitos civis.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo se presenta la historia de la Iglesia Metodista Episcopal Africana, la Iglesia Metodista Episcopal Africana Sión y la Iglesia Episcopal Metodista de Color. Describiere su contribución y participación en el movimiento de lo derecho civil en los EE.UU. en el quincuagésimo y sexagésimo año del siglo 20 y introdujese a la respectiva bibliografía y la discusión entre los científicos sociales y los historiadores.

**Palabras clave:** el metodismo americano; Iglesia Metodista Africana Episcopal; Iglesia Metodista Episcopal Africana Sion; Iglesia Metodista Episcopal de Color; Movimiento de los derechos civiles.

## **Introduction**

The constructed category of race in American society became an insuperable barrier between white and black Methodists from the arrival of the first Wesleyan preachers in New York City in 1766 until the present. Though they professed a common fidelity to Wesleyan Christianity, most African Americans over the last three centuries have occupied a subordinate status in an unyielding racial hierarchy of caste and privilege. Concrete differences in the social and economic location of whites and blacks also created for each group distinct perceptions of existential realities and the development of different emphases upon specific aspects of Christian belief and doctrine. That all of them were Methodists did not mean that the two groups heard and imbibed the preaching and singing of Wesleyan evangelists in the same way. Perhaps, Francis Asbury knew better than other Wesleyan whites the fundamental distinction between them and their black counterparts. The bishop, though mindful of the servile condition of the black population, declared that his sect would have fared better in American society if their preachers initially had focused on black evangelization. As early as 1796 he observed a declining spirituality among white Methodists and this caused him to lament “the superficial state of religion among the white people who are called Methodists”. Therefore, Asbury asserted that “I have thought if we had entered here to reach only to the Africans, we should probably have done better” (apud DICKERSON, 1995, p. 13). What did Asbury mean and what differences did he discern between white and black Methodists that required such a dramatic declaration? Did slavery and societal subordination confer upon blacks a serious spirituality that white Methodists no longer pursued? Did the increased institutionalization of Methodism, especially within a growing urban and southern white bourgeoisie, marginalize poor whites and black slaves who were the first converts to this enthusiastic and ecstatic sect? It was surely indisputable that camp meeting and circuit-riding preachers who directed their appeals to impecunious recruits stirred in them emotive responses and affirmations of their equality before God and thus succeeded in drawing them into the Methodist fold. When this clerical class became less numerous, so did these appeals to the grassroots diminish.

## **Methodist Spirituality: personal salvation tied to the collective condition**

Methodism, familiarly called the “religion of the warm heart,” was characterized by deep spirituality. This depth of divine experience, a normative encounter for Wesleyan adherents, was more than a singular or self-contained part of their religiosity. Rather, it was foundational, connective event that tied personal salvation to the collective condition and

welfare of all of God's creation. Asbury believed that Methodism was better off in the hearts and hands of African Americans because of their thick spirituality. This distinguishing feature showed their salvation as unusually authentic and caused its derivative holiness to abound in the personal precincts of the soul and to spill over as a salutary force within the rest of human society. Though grassroots blacks drew from no scholarly lexicon of Wesleyan theology to explain what Methodism meant to them, they used conversion narratives, hagiography, hymnody, sorrow songs, and other idiomatic expressions to describe in vernacular language the same scriptural and social holiness to which contemporary scholars now refer.

### **The creation of African Methodist Episcopal Churches in the USA**

Richard Newman, Richard Allen's most recent and insightful biographer, chronicles how the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church envisaged the link between the personal holiness of the sanctified self and its derivative social holiness for the broader society. He correctly notes Allen's personal piety and renewal through Methodism, but fails to see how his vision for civic purity drew from his salvific experiences. Despite Newman's inattention to the totality of Allen's Wesleyan spirituality, he rightly describes his identity and perspectives as thoroughly Methodist (NEWMAN, 2008, p. 39-42). Hence, Allen became a paradigmatic Methodist who embodied the twin attributes of spiritual fervor and social saintliness that the still living founder, John Wesley, expected of his adherents. Despite his iconic status as a Wesleyan black patriarch, Allen had a disastrous relationship with the fledgling AME Zion Church and had only tenuous ties with Peter Spencer, the Delaware leader of the African Union Methodists. Nonetheless, his 1787 exodus from St. George Methodist Church, though repeatedly reenacted in several secular settings throughout the African American experience, possessed a symbolical power for other black Methodists whether they belonged to Allen's denomination or not. Wesleyan blacks, in multiple encounters throughout the Atlantic World, asserted their right to institutional autonomy and their right to apply their Methodist sensibilities to their plight both as slaves or as quasi-free people (GLAUDE, 2000, p. 24-27 e 45-46). So, Allen offered the St. George exodus as a launch of Wesleyan black consciousness and as reclamation of an authentic Methodism which Wesleyan whites no longer embodied.

Traditional interpretations of the St. George exodus define it in purely racial terms. Allen, Absalom Jones, and other members of the Free African Society in November 1787, a date that some scholars dispute, were told not to pray on the main floor of the sanctuary. Rather than submit to this sacrilege, they departed vowing never to return again. Their treatment was offensive on multiple levels. First, Allen and others had been Methodists

almost as long as the sect had been present on American soil. Allen, himself, was converted in 1777, only nine years after the first Wesleyan preachers landed in New York City. Moreover, they internalized Methodist beliefs and rituals in ways indistinguishable from Wesleyan whites. They were a part of classes and learned the same habits of piety and mutual obligations which these religious cells rigidly required. Additionally, Allen, in developing his conversion narrative relied on standard Methodist phraseology and repeated familiar lyrics from Charles Wesley's "And Can It Be That I Should Gain An Interest in the Savior's Blood" (DICKERSON, 2009, p. 14-17). After orchestrating in Delaware the conversion of his impecunious slave owner, Allen worked outside jobs to buy his freedom in 1783. He traveled throughout the Middle Atlantic as a Methodist preacher and won a legion of mostly white friends, including Francis Asbury, all of whom attested to his oratorical skills and his exemplary character. Then, in 1784, a year that for Allen was as important as 1787, the "Christmas" Conference was held in Baltimore to formally establish an American Methodist denomination. Harry Hosier, another black Methodist preacher was present, and, perhaps, Allen, was there also, though some scholars doubt it. Nonetheless, Allen knew what happened and believed that it portended a bleak future for Methodism. Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke ascended to the episcopacy and Allen thought that "this was the beginning of the Episcopal Church amongst the Methodists." He added that "many of the ministers were set apart in holy orders at this conference, and were said to be entitled to the gown." Consequently, Allen, who already had been socialized to the rigors of the itinerancy, declared that "religion has been declining in the church ever since" (ALLEN, 1990, p. 20).

Scholars err when they fail to connect Allen's comments about the 1784 conference to the 1787 exodus. While the latter seemed to be a purely racial incident, it should be framed mainly as an egregious manifestation of spiritual declension within American Methodism. As the sect declined into diminishing spiritual fervor which showed in its muted opposition to slavery, Allen saw something beyond racism as ailing American Methodism. He noticed what Asbury viewed in the 1790s as Methodism, though still in its infancy, losing its zeal for personal holiness and misdirection away from social holiness for society and for all of God's creation. Allen hoped to rescue these Wesleyan tenets and revive them within African Methodism. Hence, he led efforts to ameliorate suffering in Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic in 1793, fought against the forced removal of free blacks through colonization, and as an AME bishop chaired the first national Negro convention to plan strategies for black advancement. He did this and more while discharging complicated ecclesiastical responsibilities in securing legal recognition for an independent black denomination,

building its infrastructure, and charting its spread within the black Atlantic beginning in 1816.

Allen, though paradigmatic because of his multiple accomplishments, was hardly singular among early African Methodists in his apprehension of black Wesleyan consciousness about freedom and its anchor in salvific experience. He and others imbibed essential Methodist theology which sought the creation of societies that came as close as possible to the freedom for body, soul, and spirit that the early evangelists espoused. Hence Allen's rival, the first bishop of the AME Church, Daniel Coker of Baltimore, left the United States on the ship, ELIZABETH, in 1820 with eighty-six others to settle in Africa in the creole colony of Sierra Leone where he founded another African Methodist body. He dreamed that other African Americans would join them to escape American slavery and racism and chart their own destiny on the "mother" continent. Similarly, another African American Methodist, George R. McGill, a member of Sharp Street Methodist Church, around this same time, started the Maryland Haitian Company to encourage emigration to the independent black republic. After a trip to Haiti and consultation with its black president, McGill returned to Baltimore to recruit settlers and agreed to transport them on the vessel, the DROMO. Moreover, these same sentiments and similar actions characterized African Methodists who established the Union Church of Africans in Wilmington, Delaware in 1813 and the AME Zion Church in New York City in 1821. Christopher Rush, an escaped slave from North Carolina and a Zion Church founder, belonged to the executive committee of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in the 1840s (See MARKWEI, 1965, p. 41-45; MELTON, 2007, p. 73; WALLS, 1974, p. 144).

### **Methodist voices against slavery and in favor of social holiness as spiritual issue**

Despite denominational differences, African Methodists in at least four ecclesiastical organizations drew the same understanding from Wesleyan tenets that spoke against slavery and forms of social subordination as an affront to God's plan for creation. These were not sociological issues but ones which were thoroughly spiritual. That's what Asbury and Allen meant when they referred to the declining spirituality spreading among Methodists and the need to recapture the holiness that had given their sect its peculiar religious identity. Black Methodists were attached to this linear connection between themselves and the earliest evangelistic efforts of their founder, John Wesley. The AME bishops in their episcopal address to the 1896 General Conference reminded delegates that:

On November 27th, 1758, Rev. John Wesley rode to Wandsworth and baptized two (2) Negro's belonging to Sir Nathan Gilbert, Speaker in the House

Assembly in Antigua, British West Indies. He says of them: "One of them is deeply convicted of sin; the other rejoiced in God, her Saviour, and are the first African Methodists I have known."

These AME prelates traced their own beginnings and believed that blacks in other Methodist bodies also tracked their origins directly from these ministrations of the founder himself (JOURNAL OF THE TWENTIE-TH QUADRENNIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, 1896, p. 89). The constructive challenge that lay before black Methodists in the *ante bellum* period seemed insuperable. They undertook to build institutional structures that performed a broad range of normative functions in ministry, evangelism, education, and publishing. At the same time, African Methodists, in avoiding an identical decline in Wesleyan spirituality that American Methodists had experienced, required their church bodies to affirm insurgent impulses aimed against sinful societal structures. Allen in 1822 provided refuge to his pastor in Charleston, South Carolina, Morris Brown, with sanctuary in Philadelphia. A local preacher in Brown's church, Denmark Vesey, planned a slave insurrection which city authorities uncovered and crushed. Vesey and others, including some who were AME members, were executed and the church was banned. African Methodist churches, whether AME, AME Zion, ME, or Spencerite, functioned as stations on the Underground Railroad. This formal network of abolitionists in New York City, for example, started through the Committee on Vigilance and met at Mother AME Zion Church, a major station within the organization. Similarly, Memorial AME Zion Church in Rochester, New York aided Harriet Tubman in hiding runaways "in its pews." Jermaine Loguen, an ex-Tennessee slave and later a Zion bishop, was the manager of the Fugitive Aid Society of Syracuse, New York. Spencer hosted anti-slavery and anti-colonizationist meetings at Mother Union Church of Africans in Wilmington. His Hosanna congregation in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania also provided space for abolitionist activities including a tunnel beneath the sanctuary where fugitive slaves could hide (WRIGHT, 1963, p. 116; TRIAL RECORD OF DENMARK VESEY, 1970; WALLS, 1974, p. 157-158; QUARLES, 1969, p. 150; BALDWIN, 1983, p. 64).

African Methodist women as much as men became carriers of Wesleyan social holiness which they helped to embed in the ethos of their various religious bodies. This theological impulse motivated Sarah Allen, the widow of the AME founder, who routinely opened her home to fugitive slaves and provided them with food and funds to aid their way to "the land of liberty". Additionally, "the strong-willed" Catherine Harris, who established Blackwell AME Zion Church in Jamestown, New York "in her homestead", like Allen, offered her house as a station on the Underground Railroad. The

well-known Sojourner Truth, who espoused Wesleyan perfectionism, emerged as a major abolitionist and women's rights advocate. The former New York slave, for a time, affiliated with Mother AME Zion Church. Similarly, Harriet Tubman, the escaped Maryland slave and legendary conductor on the Underground Railroad, became a benefactor of the AME Zion Church in her adopted town of Auburn, New York (PAYNE, 1891, p. 86-88; BRADLEY, 1956, p. 108-110, 121-122; PAINTER, 1996, p. 26-31, 39).

Maintaining this balance was difficult and was sometimes deficient. AMEs experienced these tensions in two landmark actions in the 1850s. Despite slavery, the denomination spread into selected sections in the American South. Surprising growth occurred in Louisiana especially in New Orleans, where a congregation had been founded in 1848, and in a few surrounding areas. Some AMEs owned slaves, although their BOOK OF DISCIPLINE forbade it from the church's beginning. Free blacks in the South, however, sometimes purchased spouses and family members from slave owning whites to prevent their possible removal to unknown destinations. Delegates to the 1856 General Conference, especially from the abolitionist Philadelphia Annual Conference, demanded that African Methodism should enforce the disciplinary mandate against members owning slaves. Others who celebrated AME expansion into slave areas argued for an intentional ambiguity in AME strictures against these entanglements with the "peculiar institution". Though the former view prevailed, it demonstrated the tension between the pursuit of AME institutional interests and sustaining the church's emancipationist ethos. This same General Conference, however, had less trouble in establishing a derivative denomination in Canada, the British Methodist Episcopal Church. The Canada Annual Conference and its several constituent congregations were populated with fugitive slaves from the United States. They found refuge mainly in Ontario and some in the maritime provinces. Under the protection of the British Empire where the slave trade and slavery were outlawed, blacks escaped to free territories to evade the new mandates of the nefarious Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In organizing its Canada jurisdiction as the BME Church, AMEs aligned the institutional interests of their denomination to its social holiness objectives (PAYNE, 1891, 336-338, 341, 344; DICKERSON, 1995, p. 49-55).

Black Methodists joined other African Americans in viewing the Civil War as a time of jubilee in which God's promised deliverance from slavery was being fulfilled. As the inevitable end of black bondage appeared on the horizon, African Methodists easily merged the institutional interests of their respective church bodies with the freedom agenda of the broader black population. Moreover, American society was being remade and African Methodists were playing a large role in making that happen. Out of their

churches came military recruits for the Union Army including four AMEs out of the fourteen black chaplains. Bishop Daniel A. Payne of the AME Church urged President Abraham Lincoln to sign the 1862 emancipation act for the District of Columbia while preaching to slave escapees who filled contraband camps in nearby Alexandria, Virginia. AME, AME Zion, and black ME clergy poured out of northern and border cities, even before the war was over, to evangelize among ex-slaves who already had set themselves free. The 1864 New England Annual Conference of the AME Church in launching a Virginia and North Carolina mission dispatched George A. Rue to New Bern, North Carolina to start this evangelistic effort. Similarly, James W. Hood left Connecticut for North Carolina to begin an enormously successful initiative for the AME Zion Church (REDKEY, 1987, p. 331-350).

### **The Gospel of Freedom of African Methodist Episcopal Churches**

A “gospel of freedom”, says historian Reginald F. Hildebrand, defined the multifaceted ministries during Reconstruction coming out of the AME, AME Zion, ME, and the newly founded Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Black preachers, teachers, Freedmen’s Bureau agents, and soldiers affiliated with these religious bodies envisaged the ex-slaves as becoming a new people equipped with needed religious, cultural, and economic competencies. Their task was to facilitate these developments through black Wesleyan initiatives which differed in their racial emphasis. AME and AME Zion partisans stressed themes of racial pride and independence while black ME and CME representatives offered interracialism with respective northern and southern white Methodists as the best strategy to realize black freedom objectives. This diversity of views, however, led to common denominational programs in starting schools and, except for the CMEs, to pursue political activities as the best way to empower the freed people. Clearly, a black Methodist version of a “new creation” was being developed. For example, 1,465 African Americans served as government officials in the South during Reconstruction between 1865 and 1877. Of this number 237 were clergy and of these 95 were black Methodists: 53 were AME, 35 were ME, and 7 were AME Zion. What they proposed in land redistribution, support for public schools, entrepreneurial development, and protection for black civil rights aimed at realizing a new world for the ex-slaves (See HILDEBRAND, 1993, p. xix).

But, reconstruction yielded to a period of unusual deterioration in the status of African Americans stretching toward the initial decades of the 20th century. The rise of black disenfranchisement, the scourge of lynching, and extensive economic repression through the crop lien system fixed African Americans in a seeming intractable position of permanent



subordination. Moreover, the withdrawal of federal troops from the former Confederacy left blacks vulnerable to innumerable violations of their humanity and laid foundations for the 1896 Plessy decision whose separate but equal doctrine legalized racial segregation and discrimination. During this era a racial “nadir,” as historian Rayford W. Logan described it, motivated Methodist blacks to employ a range of methods to address these worsening circumstances. They articulated theological perspectives and tactical strategies to realize God’s new creation despite an ugly racial environment. Though African American Methodists relied on a variety of protest activities aimed at reforming American society and pushing it to become an authentic “promised land” for blacks, they grounded their social holiness in what one scholar has called Ethiopian millennialism.

Timothy Fulop locates the rise of this black religious ideology in this racial “nadir” period. It portended “a future golden age continuous with a glorious (African) past accompanied by God’s judgment of white society and Western civilization” (FULOP, 1994, p. 78).

These views were reflected in significant works that three AME bishops published in the 1890s. Benjamin W. Arnett in 1893 in “Christianity and the Negro” said that “the Negro is older than Christianity” and narrated how blacks interacted with Jesus and aided the development of the early church. Persons of African descent included Simon the Cyrenian who helped Jesus to carry the cross and Luke, the author who wrote one of the gospels. Benjamin T. Tanner in 1895 wrote in *THE COLOR OF SOLOMON-WHAT?* that this major figure in the Hebrew Bible was not white. This finding was crucial because “the colored races of the earth” would no longer think whites were “the leading race in all history.” In 1898 Henry M. Turner penned an essay on “God is a Negro.” Blacks, he said, had “as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro” as whites who portrayed the Creator as “a fine looking, symmetrical, and ornamental white man.” Hence, Arnett, Tanner, and Turner, though they espoused Wesleyan social holiness, viewed Ethiopian millennialism as a specific means to articulate its relevance to African Americans (DICKERSON, 2003, p. 44-49).

These concrete perspectives on what social holiness signified to blacks complemented tactical methods that African American Methodists employed to achieve a “new creation”. Moral and legal suasion addressed to the government, mobilization of protestors, and organizational efforts stirred black Methodist activism to change American society in the direction of racial equity. Bishop Turner roared a protest against an 1883 Supreme Court decision that invalidated the 1875 Civil Rights Act. This “barbarous decision”, Turner declared, “is enough to move heaven to tears and raise a loud acclaim in hell over the conquest of wrong”, Turner published his

response and that of others in an 1893 publication whose subtitle accused the court of “disrobing the colored race of all civil protection” and an act of “the most cruel and inhuman verdict against a loyal people in the history of the world” (TURNER, 1893, p. 62). Other black Methodists organized to defeat the calumnies being perpetrated against African Americans. Alexander Walters, who was elected a bishop in the AME Zion Church in 1892, as pastor in San Francisco, California, like Turner, protested the 1883 civil rights decision of the Supreme Court. In 1898 the reorganized National Afro-American Council selected Walters as its president. Like its successor organization, the NAACP, the Council stressed the importance of fighting for black civil rights. Additionally, the 1915 Allegheny-Ohio Annual Conference of the AME Zion Church convening in John Wesley Church in Pittsburgh protested the unholy treatment of Bishop George W. Clinton and Reverend George C. Clement, the Editor of THE STAR OF ZION. They were “forcibly ejected from a Pullman sleeper and carried into the jim crow car”. The delegates also denounced negativity in press accounts against African Americans. Zionites were especially distressed about the movie, BIRTH OF A NATION, which was “conceived in the mind of one, who had for its aim the destroying of the ambition of our race” (MILLER, 1978, p. 248-249; MINUTES OF THE SIXTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL SESSION OF THE ALLEGHENY-OHIO CONFERENCE, AME ZION CHURCH; 1915, p. 40).

### **The case of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church as Southern Church**

The CME Church, whose origins prior to 1870 lay within the ME Church, South, had an undeserved reputation for accommodation to the racial status quo in the post-Reconstruction period. Their leaders, at least in Georgia, identified with the Populists, who in the 1890s, united black and white farmers against exploitative railroads, banks, and large landowners. Their political insurgency disrupted the national parties, especially the Democrats in the national 1892 and 1896 elections. They sought the transformation of the corporate dominated order to one which favored farmers and workers. Bishop Lucius H. Holsey and Reverend Henry Sebastian Doyle joined that effort. Holsey endorsed the People’s Party in 1896 because he opposed Bourbon Democrats for their support of the convict lease system. The Populists, he said, allowed for “free speech to the black man as well as to the white man”. He eschewed unequal wages because they exploited blacks and he denounced the convict lease system because it subjected them to a status that was “shameful, degrading, and disgusting”. The Populists, Holsey believed, were “anxious to correct the evil, and remove the shame and disgrace” of these pernicious practices. Henry S. Doyle, the pastor at the CME Church in Augusta, Georgia, noted

one contemporary, had “the courage to challenge jim crowism”. He also joined with the well-known Populist leader, Thomas E. Watson, to organize black and white farmers and help them to understand their common economic interests. “Doyle’s name”, said an observer, “was almost as much of a household word as Watson’s among poor whites as well as the Negroes in Georgia” (ESKEW, 1992, p. 655-656; TOBIAS, 1978, p. 265-266).

Black Methodists viewed migration and emigration both before and after the turn of the 20th century as a means to create a promised land and bring African Americans to a state consistent with God’s destiny for them. Fugitive slaves sought refuge in Canada in the ante bellum period and southern blacks escaped violence and economic repression through exodus either to Kansas and the West or across the Atlantic to Africa. In the World War I era lasting through the 1920s blacks migrated en masse into northern industrial and urban areas and some enlisted in the Garvey movement to consider the possibility of settlement in Africa. African American Methodists both as ministers and migrants saw northern destinations as sites of social holiness where the blight of sharecropping and poverty no longer could mar the perfect creation that God had promised them.

Diverse destinations in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and other locations beckoned black Southerners to mills, mines, foundries, and factories to earn better wages than what were available in agriculture. The 400,000 who migrated between 1914 and 1917 comprised only a fraction of those who expanded populations in numerous northern cities and towns in the 1920s. During the height of the migration the opening sermon of the 1917 Pittsburgh Annual Conference of the AME Church was “Christ Announces His Mission to Preach the Gospel to the Poor”. The preacher admonished local churches to eschew “our Formalism and Fashion” that encouraged some to “stay away because they have not clothes to wear (and) because the service is ‘too high’ (or) too stiff”. Some congregations missed the mark because of these practices. Others, however, recruited the newcomers, many of them Methodist migrants who joined these churches. At Charleroi, for example, Presiding Elder W. H. H. Butler of the Washington District observed that “few converts have been added to the church nor has any considerable increase been made to the membership, although many people from the South have settled down in that vicinity”. Butler’s colleague, Presiding Elder R. H. Morris, however, reported that:

Many thousands of our people from the South have found work and homes in the bounds of the Allegheny District. We have looked after their welfare, and have taken quite a few of them into our churches. Ministers from the South have come in our district; some with transfers, and we have tried to make them feel at home in our churches.

Though on a different district in the Pittsburgh Conference, Morris's observation pertained to J. H. Flagg, who migrated to Johnstown in 1916 from Enterprise, Alabama to work at the Cambria steel mills. In 1917 he organized an AME congregation with 32 members, and the presiding elder on the Pittsburgh District said "the outlook is good". Another presiding elder, W. H. Truss, saw housing as a major problem. "Some pastors", he said, "have been very active in securing homes for the people". Such ministers as Harrison G. Payne at Park Place AME Church in Homestead in 1923 founded a real estate agency to acquire homes either to sell or rent to migrants "on low monthly installments" (JOURNAL OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIFTIETH ANNUAL SESSION OF THE PITTSBURGH CONFERENCE OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, 1917, p. 7-8, 36, 41, 50; 53; DICKERSON, 1986, p. 57, 69).

### **African Methodist Episcopal Churches and the Civil Right Movement as it's "second jubilee moment"**

Despite the ameliorative efforts of African Methodists, they could not nullify the hostility of whites who rioted against black newcomers and employers who sustained discriminatory treatment of black workers. These circumstances persuaded migrants to heed Marcus Garvey's nationalist appeals about resettlement in Africa. Because AME Bishop Henry M. Turner in the 19th century had encouraged emigration to the "mother" continent, Garvey built on this precedent in the 1910s and 1920s through his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Not a few black Methodists, both clergy and lay, supported the Jamaican-born leader and endorsed his Black Star Line shipping enterprise and self-help initiatives.

Emily C. Kinch, for example, was Turner's successor because of her time as an AME missionary in Sierra Leone and Liberia where the bishop established annual conferences in 1891. Kinch who lived in West Africa from 1908 to 1910 became an avid Garveyite and spoke at the UNIA's Liberty Hall in New York City telling of Garvey's influence in Africa. She described the continent as "a land that flows with milk and honey" and she declared that "if there are men of vision and men of brains and men of character and men who will gladly die for this cause, then I want you to know that there are women also who will join you and will gladly die with you that Africa might be redeemed." She told the audience that "you think it is a wonderful thing to be in Harlem, but you have never enjoyed your manhood until you have walked in Liberia and have come in contact with the black President of that country". She added that "the only requirement of Liberia is that you are black. Let us therefore join hands and back up the man (Garvey) who is leading us out of this wilderness into the Promised Land" (BURKETT, 1978, p. 43, 48-49).

James W. H. Eason, an AME Zion pastor in Philadelphia, drew his commitment to Africa from James E. K. Aggrey, his professor at Hood Theological Seminary, his denomination's flagship institution in North Carolina. Aggrey, who was born in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), supported the development of the AME Zion Church in that British colonial possession. Clearly, Garvey's Africa emphasis and anti-colonialism attracted Eason and led to his rise within the UNIA to Chaplain- General and then Second Assistant President-General between 1919 and 1922. Though he later feuded with Garvey, opposed the UNIA, and was mysteriously murdered in 1923, Eason stayed steadfast to nationalist advocacy. "I believed in Garvey and Garveyism," he said. Garvey "has sacrificed his time, sacrificed his blood, and even tonight is sacrificing his life that 400,000,000 Negroes may live". He added that blacks should "stand on your feet for a while; catch a glimpse of Ethiopia, the star of freedom-the star of your redemption" (BURKETT, 1978, p. 51, 53, 55, 60-61, 63; WALLS, 1974, p. 235; 240).

More than in any other period in American history, African Americans in general and black Methodists in particular turned to the federal government as a principal player in realizing the "new creation" for blacks. Welfare state liberalism which proposed an inviolable "safety net" of programs for the poor, the unemployed, and the elderly and institutional protections for workers, farmers, and other vulnerable sectors of the economy drew endorsements from African American Methodists. This support made many Methodists New Deal and Fair Deal Democrats who threw their political loyalties to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Even those who remained Republican embraced the premises on which welfare state liberalism were based. Richard R. Wright, Jr., the Editor of THE CHRISTIAN RECORDER, voted for FDR in 1932, but in 1936, the year he was elected as an AME bishop, he "felt that it would be a calamity not to re-elect" him to the presidency. Therefore, Wright involved himself with Eleanor Roosevelt's Good Neighbor League to aid the reelection campaign. He reasoned that several New Deal agencies "benefited my people as well as the nation." He chaired the League's "colored committee" and through it he published "Why the Colored Man Should Vote for Roosevelt". A million copies were distributed. Wright's counterparts in the AME Zion Church validated in 1940 what he had done four years earlier. In behalf of his episcopal colleagues Bishop William J. Walls in a telegram to the President said that the "people of my race always have liked the name Roosevelt". He added that "the human race is indebted to you for the great social emphasis you have given to the statesmanship of our times" (WRIGHT, 1965, p. 208-210; WALLS, 1974, p. 542). At the same time African American Methodists pressed Roosevelt to move beyond social welfare

objectives to extend employment protections to black industrial workers. A. Philip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters who was steeped in the AME heritage, Bishop Walls, and other Wesleyan blacks, though enthusiastic about Roosevelt's support of unions in the mass production industries where most black were employed, believed the president needed to be equally fervent in backing anti-discriminatory measures in behalf of these same workers who had voted for him in at least two previous elections. Therefore, Randolph spearheaded the mobilization of 100,000 blacks who would march on Washington, D. C. for federal safeguards to protect black laborers in defense industries. With World War II on the horizon, FDR relented and issued Executive Order 8802 which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee. The agency barred discrimination on the basis of race and religion in any mill, factory, mine, plant, or shipbuilding facility holding a federal contract. Randolph, however, made permanent his March on Washington a Movement to insure that these workplace advancements were sustained. In these efforts Bishop Wright supported him despite dissent from some of his episcopal colleagues. Randolph also drew support from Archibald J. Carey, a Republican and an AME pastor in Chicago. Though the federal FEPC expired in 1946 and received no congressional support to establish it permanently, Black Methodists backed initiatives to set it up on the state level. Hence, AME Bishop David Henry Sims became a political ally of Thomas E. Dewey, a G.O.P. presidential candidate in 1944 and 1948, who signed as governor a strong FEPC in New York in 1945. Also, John Adams, an AME presiding elder in the Nebraska Annual Conference who succeeded his son as a senator in their state's unicameral legislature, pushed, albeit in vain, for the passage of several FEPC bills in 1949 and 1950v(DICKERSON, 2013, p. 301-303; DICKERSON, 1995, p. 109-110).

The Truman Administration, like its predecessor, proposed to its political coalition a range of social welfare initiatives that built on New Deal precedents. President Truman wanted universal health insurance, some island benefits for military veterans, and advocacy of labor interests over those of corporations. Additionally, as one historian described it, the president's policies were a "coming of age of civil rights" as a national issue. He desegregated the military, appointed a high level civil rights advisory committee, and broke with segregationist Democrats over a strong civil rights plank in the 1948 party platform. At the national and local levels black Methodists in theology and tactics pushed toward furthering their vision of a recreated society that realized racial equity. Truman, for example, named two blacks to his 15 member President's Committee on Civil Rights which had been created through Executive Order 9808. The two African Americans were Channing H. Tobias, head of the YMCA's Colored

Work Department, NAACP official, and a veteran CME minister, and Sadie T. M. Alexander, a distinguished Philadelphia attorney, granddaughter of AME Bishop Benjamin T. Tanner, and general counsel for the AME Council of Bishops. Tobias and Alexander played a large role in morally framing the 1947 report, *TO SECURE THESE RIGHTS*. The hard hitting report exposed the ugly discriminatory treatment that African Americans encountered. The report also identified four essential rights including the right to safety and security, an obvious swipe at lynchings, the right to citizenship and its privileges especially in voting, the right to freedom of conscience and expression, and the right to equality of opportunity. These principles helped to articulate what would become the objectives of the burgeoning civil rights movement. Tobias and Alexander had as their local counterparts such black Methodists as Archibald J. Carey, Jr., the pastor of the socially conscious Woodlawn AME Church in Chicago where he provided the first headquarters for the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.), Carey who was elected as a Chicago alderman in 1947 sponsored in 1949 a bill which would outlaw racial discrimination in publicly aided housing. Though the proposed Carey ordinance was defeated, it became a template for measures in other cities and demonstrated an escalating militancy especially in black Methodist circles for an aggressive push for black civil rights which was a thoroughly Wesleyan sensibility (SITKOFF, 1971, p. 597-616; DICKERSON, 2013, p. 305-308; DICKERSON, 2010, p. 100-104).

The civil rights movement was perhaps a second jubilee moment in the theological and historical development of African American Methodism. The Civil War had been envisaged as a divine event when creation came closest to renewal. Wesleyan blacks viewed it that way and thought that their salvific experiences in which they were remade as a new, manumitted people spilled over into a renewal of American society that validated John 8:36, that says “if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed”. Free people in a liberated “new creation” seemed to have reached fruition. The civil rights movement and its success which drew upon a similar vision and depended on the pivotal and indispensable presence of black Wesleyan peoples. Though there were many Methodist followers, there was an unusual aggregation of theoreticians and tacticians whose contributions shaped the national civil rights movement. A. Philip Randolph conceptualized Gandhian nonviolence as a force in energizing grassroots mobilization techniques crucial to movement campaigns. The involvement of J. A. De Laine and Oliver L. Brown in what became the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in the *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION OF TOPEKA* helped to deliver a final death blow to segregation in public schools. The legendary Rosa Parks, a stewardess in St. Paul AME Church in Montgomery and secretary of the local NAACP Chapter, in refusing to

relinquish her seat on a local bus, brought to a climax her many years of civil rights activism in Alabama. Daisy Bates's leadership of the Arkansas State NAACP sustained the Little Rock Nine in their desegregation efforts at Central High School in 1957 and 1958. The thick participation of African Methodists especially in the historically black denominations intensified through Roy Wilkins, the head of the national NAACP and a consistent supporter of his Harlem parish, Bethel AME Church, and the NAACP board chair, Bishop Stephen Gill Spottswood of the AME Zion Church. The efforts of these AMEs coalesced with the local initiatives of such local leaders as general officers Andrew N. White, another AME in the Nashville Movement, and S. S. Seay of the AME Zion Church in the Montgomery bus boycott (DICKERSON, 2009, p. 154-173).

Few could have predicted, however, that the creation of a segregated Central Jurisdiction during the Methodist merger in 1939 would unleash irreversible integrationist energies that would prove imperative and integral to the civil rights movement. Activists for whom the Central Jurisdiction became a formative religious experience transposed their reactions into unstinting exertions for the broader black struggle. Morris Davis in *The Methodist unification* correctly argues that the union of the ME Church, the ME Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church represented a triumph of white Methodist identity grounded within a self-defined American Christianity that tolerated and mandated the separation and subordination of African Americans. In response, black Methodists in the new denomination rebelled against this degrading reinterpretation of the Wesleyan ethos and polity. Because these attitudes and actions reflected intractable racial realities in the American social order, black Methodist activists pursued a classically Wesleyan vision of church and society consistent with Methodist social holiness. James Farmer and James M. Lawson, Jr., black Methodists with primary exposure to the new Central Jurisdiction, became among the most influential and indispensable forces within the civil rights movement (See DAVIS, 2008).

Farmer, the son of a ME minister with a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible, refused, while studying at the School of Religion at Howard University, ordination in the Methodist Church. Offended by the establishment of the Central Jurisdiction, Farmer, a student of Howard Thurman, a Gandhian admirer, took a job with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist organization. Along with other activists, he determined that the black struggle could benefit from pacifist methodologies. Hence, they started in 1942 the Congress of Racial Equality. Its Journey of Reconciliation in 1947, freedom rides in 1960, and voter registration campaigns in Mississippi and Louisiana in 1964 developed as pivotal benchmarks in the civil rights struggle. Farmer who stood as the theoretical and tactical center



of these initiatives drew religious energy from what white Methodists presented as their raw racism in the 1939 merger. His integrationist vision was reinforced because of these Wesleyan lapses and energized through his embrace of Gandhian nonviolence. Lawson's father had been an AME Zion who transferred his clerical credentials to the ME Church. Though he had the same repulsion that stirred Farmer, Lawson was involved with peace fellowships within the Methodist Church whose vision for their denomination differed from those who engineered the creation of the Central Jurisdiction. Stands against both racism and militarism motivated these Methodists and energized Lawson and inspired him to connect with A. J. Muste of FOR and intensify his study of Gandhian nonviolence. These influences drove his opposition to the Korean War, his refusal to accept the draft, and to serve in the prison to uphold his anti-war and nonviolent principles. His father, a long-time militant against racism, and his mother, a firm proponent of nonviolence, helped to frame his civil rights involvements in teaching in 1959 in the Nashville nonviolent workshops, his role in 1960 in aiding the founding of SNCC, and his leadership in 1968 in the Memphis sanitation workers strike. Martin Luther King, Jr. greatly benefited from his intellectual mentorship and example as a nonviolent practitioner as did the entirety of the movement's army of nonviolent activists. The national reach of Farmer and Lawson was reflected in the significant presence of ME ministers, I. DeQuincey Newman and Joseph E. Lowery. Newman, active as a NAACP organizer in South Carolina in the 1940s, became the group's field director in the state in the 1960s. Lowery, pastor at the all black Warren Street ME Church in Mobile, Alabama, led that city's bus boycott against segregated seating and became a founder of SCLC in 1957 (DICKERSON, 2010, p. 295-296).

Elsewhere I have written that no Wesleyan interpretation had been applied to the AME historical experience. The same obviously pertained to the history of black Methodists in other religious bodies. These ministers and members and the ecclesiastical organizations that they populated focused on emancipationist themes in theology, scripture and hymnody. The black theology movement, however, has been the lens through which African American Methodism has been examined and understood. This particular analysis ignores the complementary concepts and vocabulary which are salient in Wesleyan theology and how blacks in their concrete historical experiences lived out a Wesleyan understanding of their sacred and secular selves. James H. Cone and Cecil W. Cone, for example, are among the most prominent of black liberationist theologians and they are staunch AMEs. Yet, they do not credit Wesleyan theology as having either a formative or sustaining influence in the development of African American Methodism. Richard Allen, James Cone said, spearheaded the black

church movement, because through the St. George exodus he “refuse(d) to accept the white master’s view of the Christian faith”. Since he ignored “the dictates of white superiority”, he and others founded the AME Church. Also, he noted that “John Wesley [...] said little about slaveholding and did even less”. Moreover, “the behavior of the white Methodist Church in America, with its vacillation on slavery and colonization, is consistent with Wesley’s less than passionate approach to the issues”. Black theology which emphasizes the centrality of black responses to oppression as the key influence in fashioning their view of God, the divine mandate to be free, and the availability of multiple means either through escape or rebellion to achieve manumission constitute the core issues that inform the black religious experience (DICKERSON, 2009, p. 8-12; CONE, 1969, p. 95; CONE, 1970, p. 72-73).

Cecil W. Cone criticizes his brother’s work for its over reliance on Euro-American theological sources and bypassing the black experience as the principal frame for his theological critiques. Black theologians, he said, should cite slave narratives, not Karl Barth, they should quote the sorrow songs, not Paul Tillich, and they should refer to Nat Turner, and not to Reinhold Niebuhr. Cecil Cone believed that black theology was authentically black only when black sources are privileged over the white sources that his brother depended upon. Additionally, Cecil Cone quoted AME stalwarts Richard Allen and Daniel A. Payne as affirming the integrity of slave testimonies about their religious experiences and theological formulations. Neither Cone, however, viewed Wesleyan theology as having any liberationist possibilities that blacks had transposed into an indigenous religious resource for themselves (CONE, 1975, p. 36, 48-49, 88).

It is possible, I believe to envisage African American Methodism as having a dual black and Wesleyan liberationist heritage and identity. The black religious experience surely empowered African Americans to believe and act as fully human and divinely ordained beings in God’s creation. Wesleyan theology, for those who became Methodists, reinforced these ideas through salvific experiences that stressed their freedom through a conquest over personal sin and a corresponding obligation to do the same with regard to social sin such as what slavery clearly represented. African American Methodists folded their Wesleyan commitment to personal and societal renewal into their black liberationist principles and praxis. Hence, I have observed that Richard Allen and other African American Methodists “can be interpreted through a black liberationist lens” and understood “from a Wesleyan perspective” that “emphasizes” their mission for freedom. Black Methodists designed their religious bodies “to invigorate the Wesleyan emphasis on the “new creation” and the establishment of a Kingdom of Grace that aimed to realize societal structures and practices that would

be built on righteousness and justice.” Moreover, “this ethos embodied and sustained the religious rhetoric and missional ministries of multiple generations of prelates, preachers, and parishioners during these two centuries of (African American Methodism),” They seriously “preached to the marginalized and developed a praxis to free slaves, fight for the poor, and stand against segregationist and apartheid systems that oppressed African peoples throughout the diaspora” (DICKERSON, 2009, p. 9-10; MADDOX, 2000, 16-17).

Unlike the Cones, F. Douglas Powe, Jr., in *Just us or justice?*, sees the Wesleyan background and black liberationist theology and praxis as interactive components of black Methodist identity. “African American scholars,” he asserts, “do not negate a Wesleyan perspective of experience, but they do take a somewhat different route with respect to experience.” Black religious sources and the centrality of liberation in theology are distinctive factors peculiar to black Methodism. How Wesleyan theology addresses experience and is expressed in an African American context may puzzle some white Methodists. The problem is that too little acknowledgement exists among black religious scholars about Wesleyan influences among black Methodists and conversely there is scant attention paid by white Methodists to the crucial matter of liberation as a theological issue within African American Methodism. Powe proposes in his book an intellectual framework where these two components of Methodist identity can be reconciled and made into a workable praxis for a Pan Methodist theology (POWE, 2009, p. 21, 24-28, 58-65).

## Conclusions

An accurate history of African American Methodism, stripped of intellectual predilections, should be grounded in the concrete experiences of Wesleyan blacks. In their ongoing contexts of subordination in structures of racial and class hegemony, they fashioned a theology and methodology to transform their circumstances out of their particular understanding of God and how the Lord interacted with them in their servile predicament. Complicated cross currents of ideas and influences shaped their experiences and placed liberation at the center of black Methodist concerns. Concepts and vocabulary diffused to them through preaching, hymnody religious rituals, and cultural idioms drew from multiple sources within their African, African American, and Wesleyan inheritances. The history of African American Methodism and the constructive theology derived from their experiences constituted the dynamic identity of peoples whose witness remains a vital force in achieving social holiness in American society.

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